

# Slipping through the net of a metaphor

MUCH WIDER THAN A LINE // SITE SANTA FE

By Caroline Picard



SITE Santa Fe stands close to the downtown historic district of the city, beside train tracks and Warehouse 21, a haven for artistic youth. Contextualized by a landscape that originally belonged (and still partially belongs) to Native Americans, within the architectural residue of a complex colonial and missionary histories, the Southwest reverberates with the fantasy of an American frontier that still, to this day, stutters in contemporary consciousness. This framework makes SITE a tuning fork for sociopolitical discussions of US heritage. It is therefore fitting that the institution would tackle the mythos of America and American identity; acknowledging the rich and complex layers of nostalgia and beauty endemic to the region, while teasing out the murky, and all too arbitrary, history of violence and complicity inscribed upon the land, and the United States as a whole. As part of its continued investigation of these themes, SITE Santa Fe’s 2016 exhibition, *much wider than a line*, is part of an ongoing biennial series, *SITElines.2016: New Perspectives on Art from the Americas*.

Within the latest iteration of this vision, past and present concur through the juxtaposition of historic documentation and newly commissioned artworks, just as conceptions of

North, South, and Middle America mash up throughout the show. With over thirty-five artists from eleven countries, *much wider than a line* presents the entire American continent as a stage upon which individual artists interrogate, refract, and ultimately resist constraint.

To establish that premise, the first room of the exhibition is dedicated to Italian Architect, Paolo Soleri’s historic outdoor Santa Fe *Amphitheatre* (1960–present). Completed in 1970, and open until 2010, the theater was designed to present Native American theater for the Institute of American Indian Arts (now located on the campus of the Santa Fe Indian School). Soleri’s theater design favors a multi-dimensional perspective; the stage is round with different floors for performers to act upon. Built from mud and concrete, with lean but curvilinear lines, that seem in and of themselves tied to late 60s visions for social and artistic change, the sky overhead becomes a participating agent as a result. As if to underscore the ways in which Soleri’s stage provides a platform for the exhibition at large, it is reproduced in multiple ways: a large-scale black and white photograph of the original structure is mounted to a wall, with an architectural addition of a bench that curves into the gallery space by New Mexico-based architect

Conrad Skinner, flanked by a video documenting the theatre’s construction, a small wooden model in the middle of the room, a suite of elaborate notes composed by Soleri as he worked out his design, and beautifully composed instructions provided by Lloyd Kiva New, then-Director of the Institute of American Indian Arts.

In New’s vision, we read the considerations required by a theatrical tradition that is not connected to Ancient Greece or Shakespeare. “The drama would be non-scenic,” New writes, “in the sense that it would at no time attempt to naturalistically create before the audience a specific locale through the use of scenery. The scenic means of this theatre would be tied up in the use of costumes and properties both of which would then need to be elaborate and rich.” With this beginning, one cannot help but imagine an American theater, or art, less susceptible to Western European influence. Indeed, how many voices, poetics, and artistic languages ought to be unearthed in seeking out a true, American aesthetic?

In the next room, across from Argentinian artist Marta Minujín’s *Comunicando con Tierra* (1976)—a large nest-like structure formed out of soil from both the historic Inca site







of Machu Picchu in Peru and Buenos Aires—vitrines contain a slew of paperback publications underneath a wall of page layouts, featuring an installation of US poet Margaret Randall’s and Sergio Mondrogón’s bilingual Mexico City journal, *El Corno Emplumado/ The Plumed Horn* (1962–1969), which integrated aesthetics and nationalities. As it appears here, the publications are at once tied to a specific historical moment and aesthetic, while appearing like playbills or a research library—concrete examples of an “American” (and bilingual) poetics that integrates Latin and South American literature, indigenous voices, jazz, Incan-inspired line drawings, European surrealists, and more.

Nearby, hang lush drawings by Colombian artist Abel Rodríguez, entitled *Selected drawings from the series The Cycle of the Maloca Plants; Studies of Principle Trees in the Forest Trees with Legends; The Cultivated Plants of the Center People; Drawings of Pineapples; Drawings of Cassavas and Other Tubers* (2009–2016)—some framed, others pinned to the wall, and others in vitrines. Among them are a series of twelve labor intensive pen and ink drawings of the same forest clearing at different times of year. Presented in this context, they look like sketches for a set design. And yet, a repeating central brown hut is the most static and prop-like, whereas the surrounding trees, with their variously shifting foliage, seem most like the actors—particularly when, in another series of drawings, Rodríguez painstakingly identifies their unique habits and properties, as one might map out the attributes of specific characters when designing their costumes.

References to theatre continue throughout the exhibition. Cairo-based artist Ann Boghiguian’s *Woven Wind* (2016) produces a manic room of chalk-based wall drawings, paper cut out sculptures, photographic remnants, string, works on paper, and writing that operate like a disorienting story board as she plots the history of the cotton plant. Similarly, Philadelphia-based Xenobia Bailey’s *Sistah Paradise Revival Tent* (1999–present) features a beaded and woven tent, quoting American revival traditions with feminist and Afrofuturist leanings: the colorful, sculpture-painting hangs from the center of a ceiling, suspended above a similarly ornate floor mat, holding space for potential transcendence. In an adjacent corridor is Albuquerque-based sound artist Raven Chacon’s installation *Native American Composers Apprenticeship Project*

## History is the play. We just happen to be a part of it.

(2014–present), a series of different original musical recordings translated to their affiliated scores, each created as part of the Native-American Composers Apprenticeship Project, an outreach program that the artist works on with high school students to draw on their varied influences—tribal music, pop music, videogame soundtracks, or nature. São Paulo-based artist Erika Verzutti installs a series of objects in *Cemitério com Neve (Cemetery with Snow)* (2015) that stand in an organized huddle, waiting like props, while fashion designer and art historian, Carla Fernánandez’s series of cotton and hand-woven capes made with artisan collaborators—ponchos made with Indigenous weavers—hang nearby like costumes not yet in use. Visitors are invited to try on the garments, reminding you visitors are actors and the narrative is taking place, by accident almost, between the constellation of artworks. History is the play. We just happen to be a part of it.

Thankfully, no single American aesthetic is resolved within the exhibition’s stage. Nor should it try to be. Nothing is purely itself. Not in the politics of an Indian Theater—an art form that had to be unearthed and rediscovered after the US Government’s genocidal efforts. Not in Zacharius Kanuk’s astonishingly beautiful screening of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), the first feature length film written, directed, and acted in the Inuit language, nor in Jeffrey Gibson’s *Like a Hammer* (2016), where the artist performs by painting text works wearing a robe adorned with metal jingles, the garment and two-dimensional pieces hanging in the space—instead there is a constant interactive excavation that destabilizes notions of authenticity, while amplifying the diverse and promiscuous layers of cultural influence. *much wider than a line* digs into the premise of American identity, highlighting a complex intersection of legacies, languages, politics, and architectures.

—  
SITE Santa Fe, *much wider than a line*, runs through January 8, 2017.

TITLE PAGE:  
Graciela Iturbide (b. 1942 Mexico City, Mexico; lives and works in Mexico City)  
*Self Portrait with the Seri Indians, Sonoran Desert, Mexico*, 1979  
Photograph  
Courtesy of the artist

OPPOSITE TITLE PAGE:  
Zacharias Kunuk (b. 1957 in Kapuivik, Nunavut, Canada; lives and works in Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada)  
*Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, 2001  
Film, 2 hours 54 minutes  
Courtesy of the artist

PREVIOUS SPREAD:  
Paolo Soleri (b. 1919, Turin, Italy; died 2013, Paradise Valley, AZ)  
*Amphitheater*, c. 1975  
Commissioned by the Lloyd Kiva New for Institute of American Indian Arts, 1964  
Image courtesy of the IAIA Archives, Santa Fe

RIGHT:  
Raven Chacon (b. 1977 in Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation, Arizona; lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico)  
*Native American Composers Apprentice Project*, 2004-present  
Workshop, scores and performance  
Score for string quartet [excerpt], Celeste Lansing, *Pink Thunder* (2009)

BELOW:  
Selected drawings from the series *The Cycle of the Ma-loca Plants; Studies of Principal Trees in the Forest; Trees with Legends; The Cultivated Plants of the Center People; Drawings of Pineapples; Drawings of Cassavas and Other Tubers* (2009), by Abel Rodriguez.  
Courtesy of Tropenbos International, Colombia CAP.

